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ABSTRACT

This paper examines perceptions of regular and special educators concerning the frequency and importance of collaborative practices in inclusive schools. Eighty schools in four rural counties of southern Ohio were ranked according to students' grade point average. A questionnaire was distributed to regular and special educators serving on collaborative teams in 24 schools that represented the top and bottom 15 percent of ranked schools. Responses from 66 teachers and principals reveal that special and regular educators in both groups of schools have similar perceptions concerning the importance of specific collaborative practices. However, professionals in less successful schools do not perceive themselves as effectively implementing collaborative practices that support role reciprocity among regular and special educators involved in inclusive education. These results confirm the assertion that professional credibility issues, differing conceptual frameworks, and certain collaborative practices may diminish collaborative outcomes. Additionally, the principal's role appears to be a critical variable impacting collaborative outcomes. Finally, the perceptions of professionals in high- and low-achieving schools differed significantly with regard to collaborative practices related to autonomy, decision-making processes, and school norms. The paper includes recommendations to support increased frequency and quality of collaborative practices among both regular and special educators. (LP)

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SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES AMONG RURAL SPECIAL AND REGULAR EDUCATORS

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SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION PRACTICES AMONG RURAL REGULAR AND SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Introduction

The wide-spread movement toward collaboration in which special and regular educators work together in support of students with or at-risk of handicapping conditions is an increasingly-accepted service delivery option. The movement to adopt collaboration as a service delivery option resulted from an increase in the number of students identified as learning disabled (Algozzine, Christensen, & Ysseldyke, 1982; Pugach & Lilly, 1984), an increase in the number of at-risk students (Friend, 1985; Gans, 1985), an attempt to reduce the number of student referrals to special education (West & Brown, 1987), and an attempt to include all students, regardless of skill or ability, in mainstream educational programs (Wang, 1987).

As the collaborative service delivery model is implemented by educators in an attempt to address the issues delineated above, new challenges may emerge which could complicate or diminish the effectiveness of a collaborative service delivery model. Johnson, Pugach, and Hammittee (1988) indicated that role ambiguity, insufficient time, high caseloads, professional credibility, differing conceptual frameworks, power issues, and differences in knowledge levels related to instruction, legal procedures, and collaboration and clinical practices are potential barriers to successful collaborative partnerships between regular and special educators. Idol-Maestas and Ritter (1985) note that insufficient preparation, lack of confidence, the validity of professional training, and administrative failure to implement a collaborative service delivery model as additional potential barriers which may diminish the positive impact of collaboration. Margolis and McGettigan (1988) cite autonomy and decision-making issues, expectations and assistance, school norms, interpersonal support, teacher satisfaction and experience, understanding, and adaptation as motivational issues which potentially detract from successful collaborative outcomes. Yet, the collaborative service delivery model is perceived by educational researchers and practitioners as effective in improving students' academic performance and decreasing students' disruptiveness (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, & Stecker, 1990), as well as affecting teachers' belief that professional skills have improved, reducing rates of referral to special education, and improving understanding of students' needs (Witt & Elliot, 1983). The professional literature suggests the existence of professional barriers which diminish the positive impact of collaboration as a service delivery model. Simultaneously, results from other studies point to its successful implementation. These conflicting results give rise to the following question: Are there differences in both perception and frequency of use of collaborative practices among regular and special educators engaged in a collaborative service delivery model?

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Method

This study examined the perceptions on the importance of collaborative practices and frequency of use among regular and special educators engaged in collaboration. Eighty schools in four rural counties of southern Ohio were ranked according to students' grade point average (mean grade of each student/five students = grand mean). A questionnaire, the "Survey of Critical Collaborative Practices" was distributed to all regular and special educators serving on collaborative teams in the top and bottom 15% of ranked schools. For each item on the questionnaire, subjects were asked to circle a value on a 5 point Likert scale which represented her or his perception of its importance. For the same item, each subject circled a value on a second Likert Scale which described their perception of the frequency of use. Responses were analyzed using the t-test for independent samples to determine whether significant differences existed between subjects in the "more" or "less" successful schools on their perceptions of the importance of and frequency of use of collaborative practices.

Results

Ninety-one percent of all subjects (N = 66) returned completed questionnaires. At each of the 24 schools targeted, the school principal, one regular and one special educator was asked to complete a questionnaire.

> There were no significant differences between subjects in more or less successful schools relative to perceptions on the importance of collaborative practices. The following collaborative practices had means of 4.0 or higher among all subjects.
>
> During collaboration, the regular educator's professional knowledge is solicited routinely by the special educator to develop effective interventions for at-risk students or students with handicapping conditions.
>
> During collaboration, the special educator's professional knowledge is solicited routinely by the regular educator to develop effective interventions for at-risk students or students with handicapping conditions.
>
> During collaboration, the special educator's recommendations are implemented to meet the needs of at-risk students or students with handicapping conditions.
>
> Special educators in my building accept responsibility for collaborating with regular educators to meet the needs of at-risk students.
>
> Regular educators in my building accept responsibility for collaborating with special educators to meet the needs of students with handicapping conditions.

Special educators in my building accept responsibility for collaborating with regular educators to meet the needs of students with handicapping conditions.

During collaboration, my collaborative partner acts as though what I say is professionally relevant.

The special educator works hard to provide the appropriate support for at-risk students.

The special educator works hard to provide the appropriate support for students with handicapping conditions.

The regular educator works hard to provide the appropriate support for at-risk students.

The regular educator works hard to provide the appropriate support for students with handicapping conditions.

Special educators have received sufficient training to engage in meaningful collaborative partnerships.

When I collaborate with another teacher, I feel as though my professional rights are valued.

My collaborative partner is willing to modify or eliminate suggested interventions when those interventions may be in opposition to the standard practices which I typically follow.

I can count on the principal to help me implement any part of an collaborative intervention.

I value the type of assistance with academic interventions provided by the principal.

I value the type of assistance with behavioral interventions provided by the principal.

Many interventions developed as a result of collaboration have helped at-risk students.

Many interventions developed as a result of collaboration have helped students with handicapping conditions.

Special educators in my school behave professionally as though all students are capable learners.

Regular educators in my school solicit suggestions to provide help for students.

Special educators in my school solicit suggestions to provide help for students.

The principal in my school believes teachers who ask for help with a student are competent.

Teachers in my school regularly pursue activities like reading a professional journal or voluntarily attending a workshop to enhance their professional skills.

Please rank the following competencies on its importance to and usage in a collaborative working relationship.

- paraphrasing comments made by a collaborative partner
- nonjudgemental consideration of possible solutions
- acknowledging a peer's contribution(s)
- maintaining a focus on the student's needs
- maintaining a focus on the selected solutions
- problem identification
- goal setting
- development of interventions
- selection of interventions
- evaluation of interventions

There were significant differences between subjects in more or less successful schools on perceptions of the frequency of use of collaborative practices ($p < .01$, $t = +2.65$). Following are those practices which significant differences were found.

In my school, the principal communicates that the knowledge and experience of both regular and special educators is valued equally.

The principal helps to arrange for time when both special and regular educators can collaborate on behalf of at-risk students.

The principal helps to arrange for time when both special and regular educators can collaborate on behalf of students with handicapping conditions.

The principal publicly promotes collaboration between regular and special educators as an important professional activity.

Regular educators effectively use collaborative competencies.

Regular educators in my school behave professionally as though all students are capable learners.

During collaboration, the regular educator's recommendations are implemented to meet the needs of at-risk students or students with handicapping conditions.

The principal asks to be appraised of the outcome of an intervention developed collaboratively between special and regular educators.

The fact that special educators receive different training than regular educators makes it difficult for regular educators to collaborate with them.

The fact that regular educators receive different training than special educators makes it difficult for special educators to collaborate with them.

Special educators with whom I collaborate try to control what I do for at-risk students of students with handicapping conditions.

Regular educators have received sufficient training to engage in meaningful collaborative partnerships.

When collaborative interventions have failed to help students, please note how important and how often the following items were relative to the failure.

- limited knowledge of an intervention by special educators

To what extent have each of these phases contributed to successful collaboration

- follow-up/redesign

Conclusion

Several conclusions may be drawn from the results of this study. Special and regular educators and principals in both more or less successful schools have similar perceptions on the importance of specific collaborative practices. However, professionals in less successful schools do not perceive themselves as effectively implementing collaborative practices which support role reciprocity of among

regular and special educators engaged in the inclusive service delivery model. The results of this study confirm Johnson, Pugach and Hammitte's (1988) assertion that professional credibility issues, differing conceptual frameworks, and collaborative practices used may diminish collaborative outcomes. The significance of the principal's role in collaboration as discussed by Idol-Maestas and Ritter (1985) appears to be a critical variable impacting collaborative outcomes. Finally collaborative practices related to autonomy, decision-making processes, and school norms as cited by Margolis and McGettigan (1988) were found to be variables in which there were significant differences in perception among professionals in high and low achieving schools.

Recommendations

If collaboration will be successful as a service delivery model, policies must be "institutionalized" to encourage substantive interaction between regular and special educators. The following recommendations are designed to support the improvement of the frequency and quality of collaborative practices among all teachers, both special and regular. These recommendations focus on issues related to collaboration for practitioner, teacher educators, and researchers.

1. Administrators should assure that teachers have scheduled time for collaboration.

2. Professional staff with instructional responsibility for students should interact with one another relative to students' needs.

3. Policies regarding written and oral communication between teachers concerning students performance should be implemented.

4. Student success as a result of collaborative efforts among special and regular educators should be featured in school communication channels.

5. Administrators should schedule meetings for collaboration to bring teachers together in a formal way to prompt their use of collaboration.

6. Teacher training programs should provide coursework on collaborative methods to which both regular and special educators have access simultaneously.

7. Training programs for administrators should provide in-depth training on both institutionalizing school policy and collaboration.

8. Educational researchers may consider an investigation of the correlation between rates of referral to special education programs and the use of the collaborative service delivery model.

9. Educational researchers should continue to investigate the educational professional's patterns of communication and the mediating effects, if any, of

autonomy needs, expectations for assistance, interpersonal support, and experience, understanding and adaptation abilities of professionals on collaboration.

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